

VZCZCXRO2208
PP RUEHTRO
DE RUEHAS #0661/01 1570829
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 050829Z JUN 08
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5955
INFO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1804
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 8957
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2754
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2384
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 7239
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6409
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1637
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0591
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3441
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000661

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/03/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: MOUNTING SOCIAL DISCONTENT DRIVES LATE MAY STREET
VIOLENCE IN ALGIERS AND ORAN

REF: ALGIERS 588

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Algeria's two biggest cities, Algiers and Oran, suffered prolonged street violence in late May at the hands of angry youths for whom disappointing soccer results were the final straw that pushed them into the streets. Parts of Algiers had to shut down each night May 20-22 due to students fighting police. Riots in Oran May 26-29, meanwhile, initially appeared beyond the control of the local authorities as they struggled to enforce restrictions on freedom of assembly. The virulence of these "soccer riots" reflects a deeper socioeconomic discontent that our contacts have called dangerous. They say that while the government trumpets record oil wealth in the media, much of the 70 percent of Algeria's population under the age of 30 is growing increasingly frustrated at not seeing any of this wealth affect their daily lives. Nor does this perception promote initiative and entrepreneurial spirit, several prominent business leaders told us, as many of Algeria's young people find themselves becoming passive, waiting for the government to decide what to do with its wealth, if not hand it out directly to the people. Chief among their complaints are declining purchasing power, low salaries, housing shortages, corruption and lack of job opportunities that match their training and education. So, as the soccer riots demonstrate, they wait - and frustration mounts when they find themselves merely waiting for Godot. END SUMMARY.

SOCCER AS WAR AND POLITICS

12. (U) Angry young men, inflamed by local soccer results, took to the streets for prolonged periods of rioting and violence in Algiers and Oran in late May. For three days starting May 20, Algiers witnessed riots sparked by supporters of a local soccer team from the El Harrach neighborhood. El Harrach was set to play a rival team from the neighborhood of Kouba in a final match that would determine who stayed in the first division and who would suffer relegation. Before the final game, El Harrach supporters distributed provocative communiques, by email and leaflets, that were intended to intimidate, according to local staff who saw copies. One warned of an imminent "war" and residents of Kouba were cautioned to "put away (your) children, old people and women" on the day of the game. According to press reports, 5,000 police in riot gear were deployed to protect the neighborhood of Kouba. Press reports

also stated that 80 policemen were wounded in the ensuing riots and damage to property reached the equivalent of USD 759,000.

13. (U) The violence was not limited to Algiers. Starting May 26 a second set of soccer-inspired riots started, this time in Oran. Oran witnessed three days of troubles after thousands of fans reacted angrily to the Algerian Soccer Federation's decision to relegate local team Mouloudia Oran from Division One to Division Two. The move marked the first time the team was bumped into the second division since the country's national soccer championships were created in 1963.

Thousands of rioters burned cars, looted shops and forced police to close off the center of the city. The Oran gendarmerie prevented an Embassy delegation visiting Oran to put the finishing touches on the new American Corner at a local university from entering the center of town upon their May 26 arrival. The city center remained closed for the entire duration of their three-day visit, and contacts were forced to come to their hotel near the airport. In one case, on May 29 - three days after the riots began - a contact drove to their hotel near the airport and his car was damaged by scores of youth throwing rocks at him. Press reports indicate extensive property damage in the center of Oran, though the exact value of this damage is difficult to pin down.

A RELEASE VALVE FOR SOCIOECONOMIC PRESSURE

14. (C) Labor leader Rachid Malaoui of the autonomous union

ALGIERS 00000661 002 OF 003

SNAPAP told us on May 28 that dissatisfaction with the performance of soccer teams was only an excuse to riot. The underlying bases for the riots, he said, were the pent-up frustrations of Algerian society. Malaoui reminded us that under the state of emergency Algeria has been living with since 1992, public demonstrations are not allowed. While the riots appear to have been spontaneously triggered, he believed that individuals had been waiting for an opportunity to vent their elevated frustration with life in Algeria. Prominent business leader Sami Boukaila, head of the entrepreneurial association Club CARE, told us on May 31 that the government was fanning the flames of discontent by running regular triumphant newspaper headlines announcing the latest increase in Algeria's massive oil wealth and foreign exchange reserves. This, Boukaila said, was stunting the development of initiative and encouraging young people to remain "mired in socialist passivity" by simply expecting the state to do something to distribute this wealth or somehow change their daily lives.

15. (C) We also spoke May 28 to Haitham Rabbani, an Algerian journalist, who works with Deutsche Welle and public radio in the U.S. and Canada. His sentiments echoed those of Malaoui, namely that the rioters in Algiers and Oran were using football to vent deeper frustrations over lack of opportunity. When people see little economic opportunity and feel they have no political mechanism to bring about change or voice their frustration, he said, they take to the streets when they get a chance and football rivalries offer good excuses. Rabbani went one step further, suggesting that what appear to be random "background noise" clashes between civilians and security services are not actually random at all. He posited that the security services have become very effective at containing a disturbance in a particular location, using it to release social tension, while the Algerian government has become adept at obscuring the truth behind the clashes in order to suggest demonstrators are simply hooligans. The government has successfully isolated incidents and has prevented them from escalating, connecting, and spreading into movements, in contrast to the riots of 1988, he said.

16. (C) However, Boukaila voiced a problem with Rabbani's view

that the government is able to control the riots. In Boukaila's view, the government has been slow or unable to control recent riots in Algiers, Oran, Chlef and Berriane (reftel), suggesting deeper and more volatile levels of discontent. Prominent lawyer Khaled Bourayou provided more nuance to the situation. In a June 2 meeting, Bourayou told us there is an enormous divide between the individuals in power and the rest of the people, specifically young people. Many of those in power, he continued, come from the generation that fought for independence from France. Today's generation, he said, is not connected to that experience. In a country that prides itself on the presentation of grandiose national plans, he also underscored the absence of such a government plan for young people. Bourayou continued to talk about youth, noting that many of them are leaving clandestinely because of unemployment and lack of opportunities. He opined that it is interesting to observe that when such people are apprehended by the Algerian authorities, they are detained and treated as criminals. Meanwhile, between 5 and 10 percent of the population controls the bulk of the wealth in Algeria, he maintained.

COMMENT: 1988 ON THE HORIZON?

17. (C) Many soccer fans around the world riot when their teams are demoted to second or lower divisions, but our contacts noted that there was "nothing normal" about the riots in Oran that continued for three days without respite. Prolonged street riots are still relatively rare in Algeria, making it clear that soccer team relegation was not the actual disease. Limits to economic opportunity, perceived inaccessibility of hydrocarbon wealth and long-standing limits on freedom of association have all resulted in a continuous build-up of frustrations among the Algerian youth demographic. Boukaila said that he and his colleagues were wary, wondering whether the next riots would spiral out of control, as was the case with the 1988 riots, when localized

ALGIERS 00000661 003 OF 003

protests over the inaccessibility of consumer goods (Stan Smith sneakers in Algiers, to be precise) swept across the nation. This time it was soccer, Boukaila said, but "next time it could be anything."

FORD